

May 1977

AFFIRMATION

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THE NEWSLETTER OF G.U.M.

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Dear Friends,

BY:

You may be wondering why a group called Gay United Methodists is sending you a newsletter called Affirmation. More likely you have already guessed that this is Blair Blurbs, from the United Methodist Gay Caucus, both in a new form. These changes of name are the most visible manifestations of the spirit that was present at the spring meeting in Austin, Texas, on March 25 - 27, 1977. In this letter I will try to give you an idea of that spirit, and tell you some of the highlights of the meeting.

We began with a relaxed gathering and refreshment period on Friday evening. During this time Gene Leggett led us in a service of worship, taking as his theme a passage from Galatians (5; 22-23): "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law." We divided into small groups to examine ourselves concerning these nine qualities. These discussion groups formed the basis for other worship services which took place throughout the weekend. Before we broke up on Friday evening we set our business agenda.

The highlight of Saturday morning's session was a visit with Rev. Jack Heacock of First UMC, Austin, who was acting as a representative of Bishop J. Chess Lovern of the Rio Grande and Southwest Texas Conferences. The topic of discussion was: "What should the ministry of the Church to gay people, and vice-versa, be?" Rev. Heacock revealed himself to be honest, concerned, and well-meaning, but poorly informed on the subject of homosexuality. Here is a sample quote: "I don't understand how gayness does not distort the base of creation (although I don't support the idea that procreation is the end of sexuality), but recognizing the difference between men and women I see the physical creation of a man and a woman, a penis and a vagina, and they fit. The gay thing distorts this."

We spent most of the rest of Saturday in a discussion of our identity as a group. We considered our goals and purposes, and decided on a structure and method of operation that would best suit us. As part of this process we heard reports on the struggles of various groups that are part of G.U.M..

The structural decisions coming out of this were grounded in a feeling of "many gifts, one Spirit". We decided that we are less a national organization than a national coalition or network of local groups, such as the David and Jonathan Settlement House in West Palm Beach or the U.M.G.C. in central Texas. These local groups have common goals, but each has a different way of organizing to meet the goals. The goals we listed included: contact and fellowship with each other; being visible as a symbol of the oppression visited upon gays by a heterosexist church structure, and of the grace of God which allows us to survive and even grow in spite of this oppression; helping others establish a positive gay identity; ministry with those who feel they must remain in the closet; outreach to non-gay Christians.

We decided to encourage the formation and growth of local groups by using the newsletter as a means of informational exchange. By regularly reporting its activities, observations, feelings, and opinions for inclusion in Affirmation, each local group can serve as a model for the others and receive in return the support of shared experiences from the others. (A personal note - it is my hope as editor that every individual and group who is a part of G.U.M. will take full advantage of Affirmation. If you don't feel comfortable writing an 'article' just drop me a line or give me a call - 512-443-7967 - and tell me what's happening. You'd be surprised how much meaning your experiences can have for others.)

GAY UNITED METHODISTS

We set up a process whereby local groups may become officially affiliated with G.U.M.. All that any area (or city, district, local church, etc.) group need do is send a letter to our liaison - Keith Spare, 3720 Walnut, Kansas City, Missouri, 64111 - with the following information: the name of the group; a brief description of the plans and/or program of the group; the name, address, and telephone number of an official contact person for the group; and five dollars for a year's subscription to Affirmation. Individuals who wish to become member/subscribers may send their name, address, and five dollars to AFFIRMATION, c/o Peter F. Madison, 512 Leland, Austin, Texas, 78704. I will forward the money on to our treasurer.

We decided that the system of jurisdictional representatives that was adopted in Colorado last year had proven cumbersome and unnecessary. Accordingly we limited the steering committee to three national officers: liaison Keith Spare; secretary/treasurer Rev. William A. Krick; and myself as editor of Affirmation. The steering committee was empowered to act as a national clearinghouse of information helping to connect people in scattered areas, and to spend sums from the treasury with the approval of any two of the three.

In further action we: heard the treasurer's report (we're solvent, but by no means rich); empowered Keith to join our name with Lutherans Concerned and other denominational groups in advertizing to be placed in the Advocate, MS Magazine, etc., at an estimated cost to us of one hundred dollars per year; set a date for the next meeting. We will meet October 21-23, 1977, in either Washington D.C. or New York City, depending on which location would offer the best opportunities for meeting with national boards and agencies of the church. The steering committee was directed to make that decision by July, in time to notify everyone in a summer edition of Affirmation.

So far I have discussed the facts of the meeting. It is a much harder task for me to give you an idea of the spirit of the meeting. The group was diverse, including lay people, ministers (several of whom had been denied credentials because of their gayness), non-members, men, women (though not many, an issue on which we could focus some attention). The predominant feeling, however, was one of solidarity. We worked in a relaxed and efficient manner, with a noticeable lack of haste and tension, yet accomplished what seems in retrospect an enormous workload in one day -- all business was completed on Saturday. I cannot recall one instance in which someone felt that their views and feelings were slighted, hurried over, or given less than full consideration. There was no leader. Whenever things began to bog down or get off track someone, not always the same person, would step in and provide the impetus to keep things moving.

More important even than how we worked was how we felt. Many of those present had known and worked with each other for nearly the entire time that U.M.G.C.-G.U.M. has been in existence, several were new to all but a few in the group, but with everyone there was a feeling of caring, of belonging. This feeling was the result not only of our common experience of oppression, but also of our way of relating to each other --- a way based on love and cooperation rather than power and competition. I would call this the gay way. It is one of our greatest assets, one we can hold up to the church at large as an example. We are a church and a family to each other despite all the forces of distance, time, and oppression which work to separate us. We are a church and a family to each other --- Glory be to God!

Keep on dancin'

*Peter [F. Madison
Austin, Texas]*

P.S. - we owe much to:

Austin MCC,

St. Luke's UMC

The University UMC's Sunday School Class "Homosexuality + the Christian Faith"

Various members of Austin's Gay Community Services

for their generous hospitality while we were in town.

Every year before Annual Conference Gene Leggett requests that his local church, St. Stephen's UMC in San Antonio, Texas, petition Annual Conference for a restoration of his ministerial credentials. To do so, St. Stephen's must hold a charge conference with the District Superintendant present.

The first year, they voted to support Gene. However, the church lay delegate who read the petition on the floor of Annual Conference retracted her personal support at the same time. Last year St. Stephen's voted in charge conference not to support Gene. This year Gene and Gwhen Meyers attended a meeting at which St. Stephen's was to decide when and how to hold the charge conference. Members of the church said they had dealt with the issue last year, Gene hadn't changed, there was no chance the petition would pass at A. C., and so there was no sense in going through it again. They voted not to even hold the charge conference.

The following letter contains some of Gwhen's impressions of the meeting.

9:00 a.m. 20 April 77

The St. Stephen's Story

These people are crazy, they can't be left alone. In their efforts not to deal with Gene Leggett, gays, themselves, they gave us a no and told us not to take it personally. This movement of silly, silly people is as strong as ever. You don't close doors in order to understand and trust, you open them.

Why is it that people react so funny about gay folks? They can rationally deal with budget meetings, hunger etc., -- not saying they are doing something right but at least allowing the process to be set up even if they disagree. What can you do with ignorance? Patience

We no longer deal with old church values like trust and faith. We have realized what moves a church -- votes and majority rule. It was purely a matter of human rights, and since when do you need a majority to decide who should get them or not. Human rights are to protect the minority, but the majority votes on whether or not the minority deserves them. This I don't understand. They want to tear apart our lives to see if there's anything they can go along with, and then and only then will they vote for our human rights. Will they give us 2/3 representation like the blacks?

Is there any hope for St. Stephen's? I think so. I'd vote for any of them to be a minister.

Is there religious freedom in the church? Well, here's to acting like there's not.

GUM Gwhen

St. Stephen's is a guitar-and-banner church, though they are not fond of that description. The following are direct quotes from their non-meeting which Gene posted on their bulletin board as suggested new banners.

- If there's no chance to win, why try?
- It hurts too much to deal with it.
- Now is not the right time.
- Will it hurt the goals of St. Stephen's if we help you?
- I don't trust you.
- It bothered me so much I couldn't sleep last night.
- We don't want to say no, but you make us.
- We affirm your ministry, but not your right to be a minister.

The following letter is from Steven Webster.

April 21, 1977

Friends,

The Austin, Texas, gathering was the sixth gathering of Gay United Methodists since the organizational meeting held July, 1975, in Wheadon United Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois. Individually and collectively Gay United Methodists have experienced the depths of oppressiveness of the institutional church. The General Conference of 1976 forces us to postpone our hopes for justice in official United Methodism, and so we begin to seek another goal.

That goal might be put into words this way: to live before a hostile church institution and an alienated and oppressed gay community as signs and parables of what it is to be Gay United Methodists. The first Methodists were not an institution, but rather (in John Wesley's words) "a company of persons having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation." Wesley drew up three rules by which the Methodists were to live. Summarized, the General Rules are: Do no harm; Do all the good you can; Use the means of grace (e.g. prayer, study, worship etc.).

Forced out of the institutional church, John Wesley found that he was to "preach the gospel" and "do good" among persons oppressed and alienated from church and society. Records survive of his field preaching to workers and miners, of his teaching poor children to read, of his prison ministry. Indeed, there are records of an instance in which Wesley and the Oxford Methodists risked their reputation and their prison ministry by their persistent legal defense of a young man jailed for homosexual conduct.

Like the early Methodists, we are called to form little communities united together for spiritual and material nurture, mutual support, and to do all the good we can in an oppressed community. Gay United Methodist communities are slowly coming into existence in various parts of the country -- not in the form of a pre-packaged movement, but through the working out of common intuitions shared in the six national gatherings of Gay United Methodists.

I prophesy that our communities will be small, scattered and numerous, meeting in homes or in the facilities of friendly churches or sharing life together in common households. To nurture ourselves ("to help each other to work out our own salvation") in a peculiarly Methodist fashion we will form circuits of communities connected together to share their spiritual and material resources.

The God and Mother of us all will not leave her children uncared for. We will share the gifts of love the official church would deny gay people. In this faith and hope I offer these intuitions for the consideration of Gay United Methodists.

Your brother,
Steven [Webster]

The David and Jonathan S. H.
West Palm Beach, Florida

My thanks to Steven Webster, Steven Bostic, Trey Stokes, Ron Sawey,
Gene Leggett, Gwen Meyers, + Bill Krick for their aid + support.

R.F.M.